Harm reduction

Harm reduction methods help limit the negative impacts of substance use disorder. Like wearing a helmet while biking or a seatbelt while driving, harm reduction practices lower the chances of disease or death without the requirement that people stop using completely.

Mini-course

What have you heard about harm reduction? As harm reduction strategies become more common, you might be curious about what it's all about. According to the National Harm Reduction Coalition, harm reduction methods are intended to "meet people where they are" and can prevent deaths and suffering caused by overdose or infectious diseases like HIV and Hepatitis C.

This training will help you:

- Compare the different components of a harm reduction approach.
- Identify and rebut common myths about harm reduction.
- Describe the benefits of and evidence behind different harm reduction approaches.

Complete the course now

Harm reduction toolkit

Start by saving lives: A harm reduction approach to the opioid overdose crisis

This toolkit covers several key harm reduction methods, including naloxone, fentanyl test strips, syringe service programs (SSPs), and nutrition and its role in recovery.

Access the toolkit now

Types of harm reduction

Expand all

Types of harm reduction

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Naloxone

The National Institute on Drug Abuse defines naloxone as a medication to rapidly reverse opioid overdose. It can quickly restore normal breathing to a person whose breathing has slowed or stopped from an opioid or heroin overdose. The brand name for naloxone is Narcan®, but it is available in various generic forms including injectable and nasal. Naloxone works temporarily to save someone's life until they receive medical care. It wears off more quickly than an opioid, so even if someone's opioid overdose was reversed, they can re-overdose.

Anyone in Minnesota can get naloxone (Narcan) at most pharmacies without a prescription from their doctor. This Minnesota Department of Health has compiled a list of pharmacies that distribute naloxone and an online naloxone locator. As of 2014, Steve's Law passed by the Minnesota Legislature allows law enforcement and the public to access and administer naloxone to save lives. The Good Samaritan Overdose Prevention Law sets forth a legal duty to provide reasonable assistance to people who '...are exposed to or have suffered grave physical harm". The law protects those who help someone during an overdose from civil liability for negligence (being personally responsible in a legal way) for voluntarily providing emergency care. If you need step-by-step assistance administering naloxone call the Minnesota Poison Control System at 1-800-222-1222.

If you would like to learn how to administer naloxone, take a free1-hour naloxone mini-course.

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Fentanyl Test Strips

Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is 50 times more powerful than heroin, is the main drug involved in overdose deaths in the United States. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, synthetic opioids are developed in a laboratory setting. However, the potency of fentanyl means that even a little of it can cause death. Since 2015, the number of drug overdose deaths related to synthetic opioids (mainly fentanyl) has dramatically increased. More than 50,000 people died as a result of overdosing on synthetic opioids like fentanyl in 2020 alone. In 2019, synthetic opioids were related to 55% of drug overdose deaths in Minnesota.

Fentanyl test strips (FTS) can help prevent drug overdose deaths by identifying substances that contain fentanyl before they are used. Knowing that a substance contains fentanyl could encourage people to follow safer drug practices as many people don't even know they are getting an opioid/fentanyl since it is laced in drugs of abuse that are stimulants such as cocaine or methamphetamine. They may use less of the substance, have naloxone nearby, or ask a friend to supervise while they are using. In a 2019 study, the odds of drug-related behavior change were five times greater when people received a positive FTS result compared to those who did not.

Using Fentanyl Test Strips

FTS are legal to have, use and share in Minnesota. NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center, the Steve Rummler HOPE Network and Rainbow Health are Minnesota-based organizations that provide FTS. Check out the following video to learn how to use FTS.

1. Add sterile water to your empty baggie or the cooker you just prepared - mix well. Draw up your shot and test the residue in your cooker before you get high.
2. Dip the test strip in the water, don't go past the first line, and hold it there for 10-15 seconds.
3. Place the test strip on a sterile surface or across the top of the cooker. In less than a minute you'll see the results start to appear.

*If you are testing meth: To get the most accurate results with the FTS a meth sample must be heavily diluted. Dilute **only residue** in about half a cup of water. Don't test full shards or even pieces of shard. Just residue.

You can download and print these instructions on how to use FTS.

- This format is 3 x 5 inches.
- This format is 8 x 6 inches.

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Additional harm reduction resources

- Hope in harm reduction
- National Harm Reduction Coalition
- Harm Reduction Sisters
- Rural Aids Action Network
- Steve Rummler Hope Network
- Fentanyl Test Strips to Prevent Drug Overdose (PDF)
- Talking about Fentanyl, a resource for parents (PDF)
- Talking about Fentanyl, a resource for kids (PDF)
- With drug overdoses skyrocketing, Extension and the College of Pharmacy partner in rural Minnesota to reduce harms (UMN Extension)
- Increase in Fatal Drug Overdoses Across the United States Driven by Synthetic Opioids Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Health Alert Network)
- CDC "What is Fentanyl?"
- Find a treatment facility
- 211 recovery resources

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Principles of Harm Reduction [VIDEO]

Watch this video by Dr. Keri Hager to learn more about the principles of harm reduction.

Hope in harm reduction

Harm reduction can save lives and stop the spread of disease, but is often viewed negatively due to misunderstandings and stigma. By giving people who use drugs the opportunity to make a change now, rather than waiting for them to stop using,

harm reduction lets us start saving lives right away.

Harm reduction can lead people to treatment.

People who begin using syringe services programs are more likely to both start treatment for substance use disorder and stop using substances than those who do not use exchanges.

Syringe services programs may decrease discarded needles in the area.

Syringe services programs reduce the spread of infectious diseases with clean syringes. In Portland, OR, the number of needles found in the community decreased by two-thirds when a syringe service program opened.

Harm reduction funding can pay off financially.

Harm reduction spending does not overtake spending on other issues. Communities in Canada that have implemented harm reduction programs spend more money on enforcing drug laws than harm reduction. Harm reduction can also minimize the amount of money spent treating diseases related to substance use disorder.

Harm reduction includes abstinence.

Harm reduction is a spectrum that includes abstinence in addition to other methods such as naloxone, fentanyl test strips, and syringe service programs. While abstinence is not the only option, it’s not off the table.

Resource based on information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Harm Reduction Coalition, Recovery in Focus, Simcoe Muskoka District Health, and a report by Dr. Peter Lurie and co-authors.

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